

Politicizing Critical Pedagogies for the Logic of Late Capitalism



J. A. Rice

In current critical pedagogy theory, the term *globalization* frequently signifies the rapid homogenization and structural equivalency of material and intellectual differences into a unified, transnational, capitalist rationality. For many composition scholars, this homogeneity signals an interpellation of not just subjects, but any and all differing rhetorical logics. Judi Kirkpatrick, Darin Payne, and John Zuern, for example, argue that global homogeneity accelerates the dissemination of discursive inequality. Citing Manuel Castells' work on so-called networked societies, they claim that

[given the] flows of people, materials, and goods across borders, over oceans, and through digital networks, the need is ever-present for shared means of effective communication...English is a medium (a mediation, really) that might deliver us into a global village but will undoubtedly also homogenize it and, in the process, perpetuate the inequities long bound to discursive privilege. (Kirkpatrick, Payne, and Zuern)

Different nations' peoples, goods, and cultures can interact, but only insofar as the "flowing" aspects of information are determined by the hegemonic and political functions of *the* global language. Though the loss of national and cultural autonomy is almost a prerequisite for globalizing processes, the much more pressing aspect here is the structural dependence on the frictionless exchange between so-called identical contexts. Because information can be exchanged according to the same material and rhetorical presuppositions worldwide, qualitative contextual differences are traded for a paradigm of material and epistemological equivalency. Min-Zhan Lu theorizes this equivalent paradigm further, claiming that it primarily limits communication through its emphasis on practical functionality. For globalizing processes, the "acquisition of language is associated with the image of someone first buying or inheriting a ready-made, self-evident, discrete object—a tool (of communication) or a key (to success)—and then learning to use that object like an expert" (25). Accordingly, rhetorical opportunities are restricted to "identifying what English [sic] one needs (lacks) and what that English [sic] should (and should not) look like" (25). Thus, in its effort to accommodate globalization, rhetoric loses its critical dimension. Communication does not mean understanding linguistic structure and conceptual logic—or even the latent and reflexive processes that constitute the particularity of a language. Rather, it equals a business maxim, a mastery of prescriptive rules that govern the strict exchange between similar informational situations. Rhetoric, therefore, focuses less on how to produce systemic changes in language than it does accommodating and representing the hegemonic, functional logics of the market.

Critical theories and pedagogies have responded to this fatalist sentiment by accepting the parameters and consequences of globalization in an effort to exhaust its logic. Rather than deeming globalization entirely evil, these theorists see its focus on structural equivalency bringing renewed opportunities for discursive hybridization and rhetorical invention. In his discussion of possible disciplinary redefinitions, Craig Stroupe claims that this shift in discursive possibilities

marks a direction we can take to move from a fixation on the particular works, genres, and media, sacred or otherwise, that we have always associated with English studies to a more flexible emphasis on the characteristic social and intellectual uses to which the discipline puts discourses, whether they be heroic couplets or home pages, monographs or menus. (633)

Such redefinitions are useful, especially if they signify the transition from the traditional, Arnoldian epistemologies often associated with English studies to the era of globalization's "information economy." Rather than signifying somewhat static canons, rules, and disciplinary conventions, English studies could suggest the reflexive intersections of language and democratic agency. This newfound reflexive capacity offers decisive critical opportunities for many scholars. Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope suggest that, while globalization homogenizes communicative logics, it also provides more direct forms of democratic agency in a post-Fordist and post-Soviet world. Citing what they see as new social and political opportunities, they claim that diversity and identity are "a more fundamental dynamic than [they have] been within not just our living memories, but even our written, civilisational memory" (403). Because agents are able to intervene and redirect their work methods (knowledge

workers), inter- and national politics (blogging), and communication (cell phones, text messages, and so on), globalization can offer more personal freedoms to the individual agent. Unfortunately, and much like those theories mentioned earlier, this insinuates that valued notions of diversity must primarily adapt to globalization's *given* communicative—and by proxy, pedagogical—opportunities. As a result, chances for different systemic, resistant knowledges are sacrificed for the capacity to transform and direct "local" identities within the confines of global homogenization.

Though these critical theories and pedagogies show that globalization complicates current classroom situations far beyond traditional humanist concerns of interpretive emancipation, rhetorical freedom, and civic agency, they likewise demonstrate that acceptance of communicative homogeneity does not make room for systemic differences in either rhetoric or knowledge. If globalization homogenizes discursive possibilities and reduces knowledge to practical utility, can liberatory strategies authorize, either pedagogically or theoretically, spaces for effective social and communicative resistance? To what extent are critical pedagogies' methods and goals commensurate with the restrictive logic of globalization? Since knowledge production, market applicability, and differential rhetorics produce a new pedagogical horizon, how might teachers develop strategies that intervene, and perhaps alter, hegemonic communicative processes? In an effort to complicate and extend these questions, this article suggests that we fundamentally rethink not only the goals and methodologies for liberatory teaching, but also its practical potential for bringing about viable pedagogical and communicative alternatives in a globalized world. Specifically, this article rejects critical pedagogy's humanist and liberal-democratic methodologies on the grounds that they work with, not against, the globalizing processes of capitalism. In their place, I argue for a return to the speculative dimension historically associated with critical theory and pedagogy.

Corporate Pedagogies

The impact global capital has on critical education is most symptomatically identified through the prevalence of corporate interests and organization. As Henry A. Giroux points out, corporatization of the university often restructures academic and intellectual issues according to "matter[s] of management, efficiency, and cost effectiveness" (*Beyond* 3). In the 2006-2007 fiscal year, for example, the University of Florida's (UF) upper administration and board of trustees began to regulate budgetary problems by implementing massive cuts to those departments not worthy of significant material investment. Departments across the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences experienced various budgetary restrictions: from loss of travel funding, course offerings, and vacant faculty lines (English, Mathematics, Religion, and Philosophy) to gradual and complete departmental closure (German Languages and Literatures). Furthermore, in the areas of intellectual freedom and professional outcomes, corporatization also means that many universities find themselves adapting "management models of decision making [that] replace faculty governance" while putting academics in the unfortunate situation of appearing "less as disinterested truth seekers than as operatives for multinational interests" (Giroux 4). Such a radical move has already taken place at UF: at the end of the 2008 academic year, the provost will be replaced with a chief financial officer that will "be especially helpful as we become more entrepreneurial and identify new revenue sources" ("Official Statement").

Universities' general move to a business model in the face of dwindling of material and fiscal resources, challenges to intellectual freedom, and reductions in professional autonomy certainly attest to the influence of corporatization. But so do education's changing ideologies and purposes of knowledge production. In composition, curricular reforms attempt to ensure the practical applicability of knowledge, specifically when they restructure course offerings and content to market demands, like a "Writing for Nursing" course. Of course, adapting courses to economic opportunities is not a new phenomenon for composition or education at large. As Bruce Horner points out "[w]ork in Composition is recognized for, or defined as, the production of economic capital in the form of the commodified literacy skills to meet 'society's' demands (including the 'demands' of other academic disciplines)" (16). Because it has primarily trained students to communicate academically and professionally, composition has more-or-less always been viewed as the pragmatic workhorse of the university, much to its chagrin (Crowley, *Composition* 118-131; 250-265). In the corporate university, however, the curricular focus on the acquisition of general "knowledge skills" is replaced with a strict emphasis on careerist models and mentalities. In its rush to address corporate need, Sidney I. Dobrin argues that composition has sought to supplement—and in some cases, circumvent—courses that can teach critical cultural and intellectual skills—the Freshman Year Composition requirement (FYC)—for those courses that better fit specific careers' technological and professional requirements, such as Technical and Professional Writing. As Dobrin indicates in his 2007 MLA presentation, because of "curricular shifts, a recognition of capital potential, and perceived student demand, the numbers of sections of technical writing courses offered in a given year [at the University of Florida] has more than doubled while the number of first-year writing classes have been reduced." As a curricular and social consequence, this tightened connection between knowledge and careerism

means that our writing courses will normalize “student subjects into a discourse of corporate culture, while providing students with a formal writing instruction that is tied neither to cultural studies, political, critical thinking, nor other similar methodologies frequently found in FYC curricula.” Following this logic, the changing function and rhetorical emphases that market divisions and curricular reforms bring to the university implies that, in the demise of material and administrative support, knowledge should save itself by dismissing any educational value outside of its technical and practical utility.

If corporate trends continue, then such economic and paradigmatic restructuring of the university’s identity and purpose will not only limit teachers of writing to particular conceptions of what can be reasonably taught, but *also* what teaching writing as a critical enterprise means and makes possible. Because access to, production of, and critical interventions in knowledge production stem from not only ideas, but also *how* those ideas are practically understood, it seems as though the intellectual work performed in the classroom has a more visible and greater ideological import than before. However, if critical pedagogy believes “that education is a form of political intervention in the world and is capable of creating possibilities for social transformation” (Giroux, *Radical* 150), then understanding political strategies along well-worn disciplinary or traditional lines may not be enough to resist emerging corporate logics. That is, by primarily disseminating critical consciousness through ideological critique (Berlin), mediated hermeneutics (Freire), or unmediated political activism (Ebert), critical pedagogy’s practices are already somewhat limited from the get go. Take, for example, James Berlin’s ideological critique. By employing an epistemological taxonomy closely intertwined with ideological processes, Berlin takes great pains to develop strategies and contexts where “students situate the personal actions they invoke within race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, and age codes and then locate these codes within larger economic and social narratives” (139). Presumably, students will use these newly discovered critical and ethical confirmations to create a more egalitarian social space. But by working to prioritize and secure the ethical worth of critical ideas or popular political movements, critical rhetorical practices like Berlin’s use ideological concepts to determine organizational possibilities and goals. Put another way: the student understands their *ethical* responsibility to bring about desired social change from valuing ideological concepts—freedom, equality, and so on—instead of consistently and contingently struggling with the changing methods of material reality, communicative processes, and economic hegemony. Because they base themselves in an ethical certitude, these humanist critical pedagogies exceed their own theoretical conditions; in doing so, they are less *strategies* of social change than assertions of it.

Unfortunately, this gap between critical method and ethical certitude confirms composition’s professional concurrence with globalizing processes more than it does a resistance against them. Disciplinarily, the gap manifests itself via the economic incommensurability between ethical ideals and social change. Consider, for instance, the market demand for composition textbooks that feature Cultural Studies’ topics. Most of these textbooks devote sections and chapters to thinking about social injustices—from race to the environment—but do so only insofar as these ideological concepts never actually challenge their own market popularity or the pragmatic worth they have for today’s “knowledge economy.” That is, these ideas *should* be taught and college writers *should* be exposed to different ways of thinking about race, gender, the environment, and so on precisely because knowledge of these social injustices are perfectly acceptable to both democratic and capitalist interests. However, the moment these ideas begin to threaten their market practicality or democratic worth—from, say, a chapter that dismisses the Holocaust as fiction to a section on the trends and marketing processes of the textbook industry—they are no longer worth discussion or material investment because they are precisely *too* controversial and *too* radical. Marc Bousquet terms this paradigmatic method of approving of “safe” controversies “market pragmatism” (176). He writes that “by concealing its own market idealism underneath a rhetoric of exclusive purchase on ‘reality’, [pragmatism] ha[s] had a fair amount of success at discouraging the effort to realize any other ideals than those of the market” (176). Since these social problems’ “reality”—their theoretical configuration, importance, nuances, etc.—can be so effortlessly circulated and discussed in classrooms, forums, and academic message boards, their ethical, cultural, and ideological worth have been realized. Here, the value of a social movement is purely its marketability and democratic worth—not its subversive or controversial foundations. The success of these Cultural Studies textbooks certainly attests how well their ideologies work with globalization, but this success is nothing compared to the lack of textbooks that take either the political constitution or the ideological circumstances of Cultural Studies themes into consideration.

Of course, this is not to say that we should not prioritize and encourage struggles against racism, sexism, and homophobia inside and outside of our classroom. But it is to say that if critical pedagogy is to take its premises seriously—the patriarchal, material, heterosexist, and racial suppression/oppression of marginalized viewpoints and voices, broadly conceived—merely combating the various rhetorical practices and ideologies of said institutions at the expense of their organizational and capitalist logics misses the more fundamental difficulty a corporatization of the university presents.

Against Liberal and Ethical Certitude

Admittedly, part of critical pedagogies' compliance with globalization and corporatization derives from how they theorize this gap between communication, knowledge production, and political change. Critical accounts that ground their methodology in ethical ideals rarely take into account the residual logic of a globalizing dynamic; instead, they try to reconcile political interpretations with particular, ideological beliefs. In *Toward a Civil Discourse*, for instance, Sharon Crowley argues that liberal democracy is endangered by emerging Christian fundamentalist discourses. Because Christian apocalyptic rhetorics "preserve [their] founding belief from threat at any cost," including confronting liberal democratic principles, we must defend against their values of "privilege and isolation in whatever ways we can find or invent" (14; 194). At first glance, this pedagogical methodology seems commendable, if for no other reason than because it admits the shortcomings of liberal ideology: "liberalism is superior ... if only because history shows that liberalism allows rectification of its typical exclusions" (17). But it is also important to note that liberalism is no better at questioning its own foundations than the discourses it denounces. It never interrogates itself according to its own ideological charges or how its critique of fundamentalist Christianity's "privilege and isolation" might be connected to the larger realities of democracy or capitalism. Rather, by formulating politics as a call to ethical action—as a protection of liberalism—this strategy works as a derivative of a social and political ideal that transcends its own methodological considerations. This means that instead of providing any sort of critical intervention—pedagogical, epistemological, or ethical—these liberal viewpoints assert their position, thereby running the risk of participating in and extending the very oppressive, privileged processes they endeavor to overcome.

As a moment in what Fredric Jameson called *late capitalism*^[1], and as a somewhat unconventional example, consider the correlations between liberatory arguments like Crowley's and the recent attacks against academic freedom from conservative organizations like David Horowitz's *Students for Academic Freedom* (SAF). Horowitz's attacks against the "liberal university" are well known and receive frequent media attention. As Chris Green of the *Harris News Service* in Topeka, Kansas writes: "During his presentation [to the state legislature], Horowitz said he had learned through a Web search of academic programs in Kansas that some had a 'radical feminist' or 'socialist' bent ... The disciplines he named included the women's studies programs at the University of Kansas and Kansas State University and a K-State social work program." Following this statement, Horowitz claimed "No society can survive if its schools become one-sided indoctrination centers against it" (Green). For right-leaning interest groups like SAF, mainstream college education is primarily a question of indoctrination. Professors politically and purposefully indoctrinate students into a leftist ideology through two methods: on the one hand, they teach liberal ideas and modes of thinking that, in the conservative's ideological position, aim at undermining society and/or the very values on which it is founded. On the other hand, liberal classrooms also explicitly disparage a conservative viewpoint or ignore such a viewpoint altogether for a liberal consensus; truth is sacrificed for belief, while objectivity is repressed by radical relativity. Thus, following SAF's viewpoints, in a college education students face a gauntlet of false and ideologically charged ideas rather than critical thinking skills and objective facts.

However, more important here is how SAF understands and conceptualizes its problem and struggle along the lines of traditional liberatory arguments. Much like Crowley's definition of liberal activism, SAF uses the familiar public identity and methodology of those "fighting for the marginalized" as a political strategy. Following the rhetoric of many progressive movements, supporters of SAF claim that as representatives of an underrepresented value-system, conservatives are excluded, left out, and reduced to "second class" citizens across university culture. That the plight of *Students for Academic Freedom* follows the same methodological pattern as our professional pedagogical discussions should not come as a surprise. Similar to those pluralist or multicultural critical theories that call for equal treatment in today's educational landscape, SAF articulates their movement's goals in a manner consistent with Cultural Studies' rhetoric and ideology. And because they use these ready-made terms, methodological dynamics, and value-systems of progressive thinking to demonstrate how they are denied public freedoms, they can make a reasonable case for inclusion in the multicultural university. But still more striking are the ethical and methodological similarities SAF shares with, say, WPA-I threads struggling for a public post-Katrina New Orleans rhetoric or Crowley's ideological challenge against Christian fundamentalist discourses. If anything, these similarities speak to the limited and politically stagnant possibilities of critical pedagogies that understand ideological concepts as distinct from constitutive organizational struggle. Conceived as invested moments within a larger, fundamentally liberal-democratic rhetorical sphere, these leftist ideologies help engender and perpetuate conservative ideologies like those of SAF. And because both liberal and conservative ideologies fundamentally seek an ethical goal—both, for example, want equal institutional representation—neither attends to the organizational capacity of that institution or their own institutional investment. Horowitz's conservative organization, then, is not a reaction against a liberatory ethic; rather, it represents the fullest and most realized appropriation of its major principles by conservative thought. Thus, much like the gap between critical method and ethical certitude, these liberatory strategies only address the symptomatic and temporary moments of much deeper historical, cultural, and

social injustice.

If taken as a matter of ideological interpretation, critical pedagogy's methodological gap is a necessary misrecognition of the relationship between politics and knowledge. Liberatory theories often address what Jeffrey M. Ringer cites as the tension between reconciliations of epistemological interpretations and political ideals. Writing about critical pedagogies' idea of freedom, he claims: "We need to understand the ways in which individualistic liberty—what I will refer to as the incomplete or *freedom from* conception of liberty—limits our ability to conceive of liberty as collective. In naming this as a [Freirean] limit situation, my hope is that we can then transcend it" (763). In Ringer's view, the problem facing liberatory pedagogies stems from the unexamined assumption of what freedom is and how the term's ambiguity limits access to its promises: if a critically informed agent would just *understand* and *reorganize* this situation better—make it more visible—we could *produce* the knowledge to create a better political and philosophical situation.

Recourse to such pedagogical pragmatism can help in some immediate situations, but ultimately restricts potential for social change to outdated understandings of critical theory as an assault against false consciousness. Take, for example, the classroom activity M. Karen Powers and Catherine Chaput outline in "Anti-American Studies" in the Deep South: Dissenting Rhetorics, the Practice of Democracy, and Academic Freedom in Wartime Universities." At the outset of the Iraq War, activist fliers appeared around their campus describing the English department as liberally biased and waging a "jihad against U.S. conservative interests" (674). They then brought these fliers into a class and used them "as a means of exploring the work done in that classroom, the desires that frame expectations of higher education, and the fear that emerges when critical inquiry moves beyond those well-trodden expectations and into assessments of the national and international spheres" (675). By treating these fliers as a volatile rhetorical practice, Chaput and Powers' students could understand what constitutes cultural and ethical differences, and consequently, understand how those instances toil for and against the larger idea of democracy they may hold. But because students understand critical thinking as an agent's move from false consciousness to one of hermeneutic empowerment, they also confuse critical method with ideological goal. Students, therefore, will collapse contingent, critical struggles with a predetermined ethical obligation; that is, a recognition by, and participation in, democratic processes. Theorist Patchen Markell argues that this aim of recognition is the most appealing, if not only, strategy in critical theories because it campaigns for ethical and cultural access (much like the students of SAF); but in doing so, it does not tackle the oppressive conditions under which such social ills came about in the first place. This strategy, he contends, "conceives of injustice as the unequal distribution of a good called 'recognition'...treating recognition as a thing of which one has more or less, rather than as a social interaction that can go well or poorly in various ways" (18). By questioning the appropriateness and function of educational boundaries, Chaput and Powers' activity promotes democratic recognition because it asks students to identify with and participate in democratic processes, i.e., collaboratively considering the rhetorical effects of conservative discourse in the wake of the Iraq War. But, at the same time, simply analyzing rhetorical effects according to their potency misses Markell's larger point. Working for democratic access, cultural identity, or hegemonic recognition is not enough because such strategies do not attend to *how* such injustices continually occur; that is, they do not attend to the organizational logic of *democratic* injustices. In this critical version, the ideological concept and ethical goal (*democracy*) is itself subject to methodological consideration. As such, the invested foundations of this critical theory do not escape its methods. In contrast, the second critique—and I cannot stress Markell's commodity description enough here—the ideological concept and ethical goal attempt to *correct* the "unequal distribution" of democratic recognition. Because this theory primarily interprets and corrects a ready-made democratic horizon, it can only regulate—not change—the orientations of that paradigm. Thus, much like the critical agencies that ensure globalization, this strategy merely offers interpretations, revisions, and reinforcements of its invested foundations.

Certainly, students are affected by unfair and sometimes cruel cultural and ethical practices of various communities in the United States, but this does not mean that critical pedagogies should only use the *desire* for democratic participation and ideological clarity as a methodological orientation and guarantee. Revealing latent or hidden information to the student of composition does little to further better and alternative democratic realities. If pedagogical theories are part of a symbolic and material world where reflexivity underlines communication and education, then symbolic, ideological, and hegemonic *decisions* cannot be necessarily conscious or willed. That is, strategies that call for resistance or "recognition" by conscious cultural or ethical organization, interpretation, or participation in dominant language practices may not be possible—or at least progressively productive—for students of critical pedagogies. Conversely, strategies that desire to address and work against global and corporate logics might be more effective if they consider the speculative dimensions of their own critical constitutions.

Serious Freedom

In his article “Toward a Political Economy of Rhetoric (or a Rhetoric of Political Economy),” Victor Villanueva asserts “[w]e cannot discuss the ideological and thereby rhetorical reproduction of beliefs about gender, race, class, age, nation, religion, or any other of the axes of difference—without a grasp of how such axes are embroiled in the economic” (64). Villanueva’s point is clear: discussing the issues of critical struggles without thinking about the larger, systemic conditions that help perpetuate these undesired beliefs fundamentally misses something. In similar fashion, critical and liberatory pedagogies ought to *politicize* not just the social, cultural, and ethical aspects of democratic goals, but also the very methodologies and theories used to attain those ideals.

This *politicization* would entail jettisoning the privilege ethical and ideological orientations get in critical pedagogies in favor of the speculative dimensions of critical theory. The term *speculative* plays on what I understand as the theoretical coordinates of Slavoj Žižek’s critique against “liberal-democratic fundamentalism.” This paradigm, he maintains, articulates convincing strategies and politics for social change, but still limits critical thinking to a rational, revisionary basis that risks very little. This limitation is especially apparent when considering how these theories’ methodologies help construct a hegemony of minimal change. He writes

the moment we seriously question the existing liberal consensus, we are accused of abandoning scientific objectivity for outdated ideological positions. This is the point on which one cannot and should not concede: today, actual freedom of thought means freedom to question the prevailing liberal-democratic ‘post-ideological’ consensus—or it means nothing. (*Revolution* 168)

As an inversion of Karl Marx’s famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Žižek argues that theory has no political, cultural, or ideological allegiance outside of its own invested, self-reflexive capacities. Yet, this also means that theory’s capacities continually change through invested speculation. Determining ethical priorities first and devising strategies to meet them is neither critical nor theoretical; in fact, it is a practical exercise entirely commensurate with globalizing practices. Theory should instead continually return to itself and rethink its own conditions and limits, including how it might work with globalizing hegemonies. Critical theory, then, will not revise the world (including itself), as much as it will continually *reinvent* its methodological conditions and coordinates each and every time it theorizes. This collapsed, continued reinvention of theory’s processes and goals is precisely the speculative aspect of critical theory.

For critical pedagogies, this speculative dimension implies that if we are to remain critical without commodifying this term as a methodological limitation, nothing—methodologically, pedagogically, politically, culturally, and ethically—should be off limits to critical investigation, including our own presuppositions about those very critical theories. Politically and pedagogically speaking, this means that rather than focusing on matters of inclusion or access, theory will critically redirect the *logical* or *organizational* capacities of those ethical and cultural hierarchies multicultural, corporate logics privilege. For instance, the relationships between knowledge production, communication, and political change will not be the only the subjects of critical analysis and theoretical speculation. As a critical instance in theoretical speculation, the invested limitations of theory itself will be continually reinvented as they are strategized. In this view, theory does not inform praxis—it *is* praxis. But this is just another way of saying that without the capacity to question what makes *anything* possible, relevant, or valuable, critical pedagogies cease being effective.

Practically speaking, a speculative theoretical intervention in critical pedagogies’ own ethical and cultural analyses would mean a few things. First and foremost, rather than advocating inclusion in the knowledges and democratic politics approved by hegemonic strategies, critical teaching philosophies would interrogate *how* those very knowledges and politics prescriptively limit their social impact. As a second step, they would reinvent the methods and ethical goals by theorizing new ideological conditions. Some recent composition scholarship has already attempted to realize this practice. Specifically, Jacqueline Rhodes’s *Radical Feminism, Writing, and Critical Agency: From Manifesto to Modem* endorses a contingent, political writing pedagogy over the ethical imperative of a global/corporate educational framework. In this book, Rhodes traces the writing practices of the radical feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing primarily on collaborative writing, especially those instances that produced new ways of communicating. The women of these radical factions wrote in various textual modalities that rhetorically produced networked identities, or at least identities that participated in a more postmodern-esque fluidity. “Radical women’s textuality,” she writes, “emphasizes the idea of a networked community composed of writerly texts. In their negotiation of structure and fluidity, radical feminist texts emphasize temporary positionality and the use of available technologies” (66). And it is through these lessons of history Rhodes creates a critical, textual pedagogy: “Each textuality demands a bobbing-and-weaving, in-your-face attention to politics and textual form; each makes use of collaborative and often anonymous collective work; each, by virtue of the form of the text itself, is decidedly temporary” (67). For contemporary pedagogical practices, the most important aspect here is that radical women’s political logics, identities, and temporary writings collapsed both method and ethic into one critical enterprise. By constantly undermining any popular rhetorical or ethical imperative, these women’s speculative

modalities of writing structurally changed their reality because their ideas of democracy were defined in conjunction with their critical method. Quite simply, they did not strategize according to the democratic ideals already in place.

It is this last point—defying the gap between methodology and idea—that I would like to take a step further and claim a new direction for critical pedagogies. Theories and strategies should not outline identities and methodologies as an ethical ideal, but rather maintain the impossible tension between method and idea. Critical theories, that is, should actually *risk everything* in the act of theorizing and writing. In one of my advanced argumentative writing courses, for example, we looked at various political texts—from the SAF and Vast Right Wing Conspiracy websites to PETA pamphlets and the Democratic Party’s mission statements—and considered not only what they were doing rhetorically, but also how they theorized their social goals. As a second step, students then interpreted those polemic positions that are considered precisely *too ideological* for corporate marketability and liberal-democratic sensibility: Farrakhan’s Black Nationalism, Leninism, Anti-Semitic literature, and so on. Much like Chaput and Powers’ exercise, and precisely because these ideologies are not taken seriously by corporate interests (no one *really* wants communism), students were able to better grasp how liberal-democratic methodologies guarantee a particular ethical goal, i.e. democratic recognition. However, as a final step, students were required to collapse and reinvent these political clusters’ theoretical methods and ethical objectives. Using the speculative movements of critical theory, my hope was that students would realize that every moment of strategy fundamentally alters the conditions of both method and ethical goal.

In one particular assignment, students were grouped and required to post arguments about a social movement, political occurrence, or local problem to a class wiki. One student group used the wiki to argue against Barbara Leon’s *Feminist Revolution* article “Separate to Integrate.” These students specifically rejected Leon’s claim that a separatist feminism is not an end in itself, but a necessary strategy for a feminist integration in society at large (155). Instead, they decided that a separatist feminism, while probably not really feasible, was the only option to move feminist thinking beyond an appropriated identity—or as they put it, “beyond subjective opinions.” But perhaps the most politically telling moment in this assignment occurred on the wiki discussion board. One student changed what s/he saw as “harsh language” in an attempt to rectify the group’s post with a more inclusive rhetorical strategy. The group responded by changing the language back and pointing out the larger, systemic politic behind their post:

You don’t understand what we’re saying. thsi [sic] is not an issue of conforming to other peoples’ opinions. Leon’s argument doesn’t make sense because it tries to get along with the society that excludes women because they are women. This post tries to promote opinions that change the way society thinks about not just women but the relationship between people too. This is much bigger than just hurting peoples’ feelings.

Instead of advocating inclusion in global/corporately approved democratic coordinates, these students continued to reinvent political and strategic conditions within the class wiki. By citing the collapse between method and ethic—“promot[ing] opinions that change the way society thinks about … the relationship between people”—these students engendered a new, speculative theoretical and rhetorical ground. This is an interesting yet subtle strategy that should not be confused with those methods that advocate an empowered agency through reclamation of hegemonic practices. These students did not resist hegemonic language and identity by “sticking to their polemical guns”; nor did they emphatically reassert a ready-made, democratically recognized, polemical position. Gaining democratic recognition for feminism was never their strategy. Instead, the students’ theoretical movement demonstrates what Žižek calls “politics proper.” He writes that “politics proper” is a movement in which “a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests but aims at something more, and starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space” (*Ticklish* 208). The students’ response to the alteration of their post uses this feminist ideal not as a cultural strategy or guarantee—it is not the means to an end. Instead, they use feminism to draw attention to how the hegemonic organization (“relationship between people”) precedes and limits opportunities to change the injustices that the hegemonic system and conceptions of feminism help perpetuate. Because they were unwilling to change the language they used to argue against Leon’s article, because they made language (and writing) the very theoretical issue, their project suggests that the relationship between communicative organization and its literal inscription *is* politics within the parameters of a globalized, corporate university. As a theoretical speculation, as a material inscription, this student strategy reinvents both critical method and idea as continued, dialectical struggles between epistemological possibilities and material categorizations.

Yet perhaps the most important point of this strategy is that pedagogy is a contingent, theoretical condition—and not a prescriptive guarantee. Rather than working to build a safe house of knowledge or incorporate an alternative Other into the contemporary cultural, ethical and pedagogical scene, this more radical, politicized critical pedagogy constantly aims at writing *change*, and does so by constantly risking itself and its goals. Of course, such a strategy would also suggest that critical pedagogues disregard the immediate, pragmatic concerns of contemporary education

and social injustice for a theoretical strategy that can guarantee nothing. And that is precisely what *political* means here: not cultural accommodation, but continued, systemic, *reinventions*. It is in this sense that critical pedagogues should understand what is possible within the confines of both global capital and corporate university: “critical pedagogy” does not denote acceptable heterogeneities, differential knowledges, or hybridities, but rather this very disciplinary and political (re)inscription.

Notes

1. For more on this term, see Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, especially pgs. 1-54. ([Return to text.](#))

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“Politicizing Critical Pedagogies...” from *Composition Forum* 18 (Summer 2008)

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